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Embracing Emotions in the Workplace

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During one of our **Strategies for Workplace Conflicts** programs, a participant commented that she told her staff that she didn't "DO emotion!" I really appreciated her forthright statement which led to a valuable discussion about the place of emotion in the workplace. How do we handle the expression of emotion? Are emotions welcome or not? How do we handle an emotional outburst in a meeting or deal with strong negative emotions between two co-workers in conflict? How do we deal with our own emotions?

Emotions are part of being human. We are wired to feel. Many of us are not in close touch with our feelings, often because of our upbringing. Are you familiar with the phrase "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all!"? Emotions can spring up suddenly and may pass just as quickly. Yet, if they are not dealt with, they may fester and intensify.

Consider your workplaces during the pandemic. Can you name some of the emotions that you are experiencing? What about your employees or team members? I'm guessing that fear, frustration, loneliness, grief, and exhaustion may be present. There may also be some positive emotions such as relief (from avoiding long commutes for example).

In this article I'm suggesting something that may seem counter intuitive. Rather than avoiding or squelching the expression of these emotions, try leaning in and welcoming them into your workplace.

The consequences of NOT doing this could be significant:

- Emotion is likely to fester, intensify and explode later
- Damage to the psychological safety of your team or organization
- Harm to employee engagement, job satisfaction, productivity and mental health
- Damage to the organization's bottom line and relationship with customers

First, an important **caveat**. This pathway needs clear guardrails. If someone throws something across the room in a fit of rage, my first response is not going to be "tell me more about your feelings". If the physical or psychological well-being of your team is being threatened, you need to deal with safety first. Ensure that clear values, expectations and boundaries are in place and enforced.

AND, recognize that this outburst is a signal that something important is going on – for this person and possibly for the team.

Emotions are real and may present opportunities

Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy¹ say that emotions are everywhere in the workplace and that we need to effectively embrace emotions to create a better workplace.



So why do we often pretend emotions don't exist?

The over-riding attitude seems to be that expression of emotion is not professional or important in the workplace.² Perhaps this philosophy made sense in the days of assembly lines when worker efficiency was the priority.³ However, efficiency is no longer the only criteria for success. My legal training and experience prioritized rational thinking and the suppression of emotion from legal analysis AND relationships with clients. After all, they were hiring us as legal experts not psychologists! Looking back, that approach allowed me to view clients only as sources of facts rather than as whole

¹ Fosslien, L. & West Duffy, M. (2019). *No Hard Feelings: The Secret Power of Embracing Emotions at Work*. Penguin Random House LLC. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.lizandmollie.com/book>.

² Schwartz, T. (2015, April 15). The Importance of Naming your Emotions. *The New York Times*. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/04/business/dealbook/the-importance-of-naming-your-emotions.html>.

³ See, for example, Lau, Y. (2020, May 6). Bringing Emotions Into the Workplace. *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2020/05/06/bringing-emotions-into-the-workplace/#dd0fb90162d0>

human beings. And I failed to bring my whole self to the job. We need to learn how to embrace human emotion since human engagement *is* an emotional experience.

As much as we would like to believe otherwise, research shows that emotions (and not logic alone) have a significant influence on our decision-making.⁴ We will make better decisions if we are aware of emotions and understand how they impact our thinking and behaviour.

Also, dealing well with emotion is a key leadership skill.

How can we embrace emotions in the workplace?

I wish I could tell you there is a “silver bullet” you can use. The reality is that it takes some effort to learn and practice a different set of skills. Your first response may be “this takes too much time!” This is a completely understandable response during this pandemic. And yet, we have to consider the consequences of NOT taking this approach. The list of risks is long (see above). The good news is that there are tools and the benefits of using them are huge in both our personal and professional lives.

Self-work: learn the language of emotions

The first step is to recognize and name our **own** emotion. Most people can’t name more than three different emotions (usually anger, joy and fear). Research confirms that naming the emotion defuses its power over us.

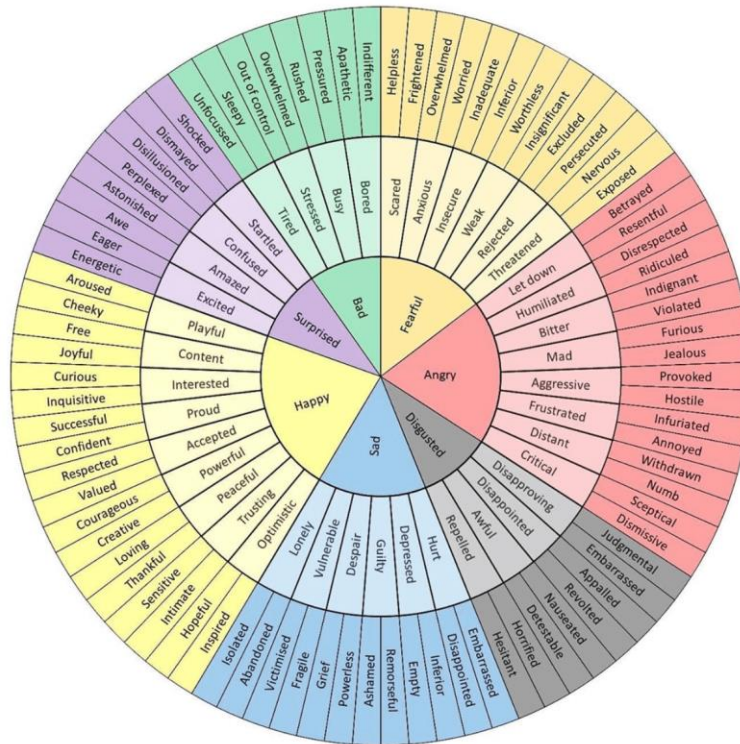
Tammy Lenski says⁵:

“Affect labeling is the simple act of noticing and putting a name to an emotion. It appears that just recognizing and naming an emotion can have a powerful effect on quelling it.”

I highly recommend using an “**Emotions Wheel**” like the one below to help you discern more precisely the emotion you are experiencing. Anger is often a mask for a deeper feeling, so we need to use it as a starting point.

⁴ Giang, V. (2015, July 6). The Myth of Rational Decision-Making. Forbes Magazine. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3047924/the-myth-of-rational-decision-making>

⁵ Lenski, T. (2019). Control emotions better by labeling them. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://tammylenski.com/control-your-emotions-better-affect-labeling/>.



Adapted Emotion Wheel from Willcox, Gloria (1982). "The Feeling Wheel: A Tool for Expanding Awareness of Emotions and Increasing Spontaneity and Intimacy". Transactional Analysis Journal.

Another helpful tool is the **Non-Violent Communication** framework created by Marshall Rosenberg.⁶ This framework guides us to identify feelings and to explore what they reveal about underlying needs (also called "interests") and values. What is the emotion telling us about what is important to us?

If you want an entertaining exploration of emotions, I recommend Pixar's film "Inside Out".⁷

Supporting Your Team

Once you have begun to explore your own emotions, make sure you are "**walking the talk**". Begin to express and talk about your emotions with your team. This may take courage, tenacity, and a willingness to be vulnerable.⁸

⁶ Centre for Nonviolent Communication. (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.cnvc.org/>.

⁷ Keltner, D. & Ekman, P. (2015, July 3). The Science of 'Inside Out'. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/05/opinion/sunday/the-science-of-inside-out.html>.

⁸ Keep in mind Dr. Brene Brown's wise message that vulnerability is the key to true connection: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability

Then, begin to introduce these tools to your team as a part of helping them to develop emotional intelligence and to build psychological safety.⁹ Consider the following steps:

- Conduct individual or group check-ins that encourage team members to share what they are feeling and to process and manage their emotions.
- Lean into the emotion of others. Use your superpowers of curiosity, active listening, attention, and empathy. Remember that emotion is a clue that some need is not being met.
- Encourage others to explore their emotions AND the underlying needs and values. This will often lead to greater clarity about what steps could be taken.

A couple of examples might help to explain how emotions signal underlying needs and to assist you in your leadership role:

- One of your employees, Joy, is resisting returning to the workplace during the pandemic. In an online check-in she wipes away tears as she explains she won't be able to care for her elderly mother. Be curious and encourage Joy to label her emotions. Perhaps her tears indicate sadness or fear. You can then help her better define what she is sad or fearful about. She may have an underlying strong need for health protection and safety as well as a desire to connect and care for her aging mother (which her illness could threaten). With this knowledge you are better able to work with Joy to design appropriate accommodations.
- John, a key member of your team, appears at your door asking to meet with you immediately. He appears very agitated. You close your door and use your voice to help calm him. When John explains about his ongoing conflict with another team member you ask questions to help him identify his emotions. He may say he is frustrated and angry that the other team member is flouting physical distancing in the office. You can help him dig deeper using the wheel and then explore the underlying needs and values. In this case, it may be that John is actually afraid that he will become ill and will be unable to support his family. John may want to protect his own safety in the workplace so he can fulfill his core need to be a good provider. Or his need may be for respect and competence which he perceives is being

⁹ For more on the important topic of psychological safety I recommend Amy Edmonson's book "The Fearless Organization". Her helpful TedTalk from 2014 is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhoLuui9gX8>

threatened. Clarity about emotions and what they reveal about needs could assist you to work with your team to define expectations and protocols.

How are you feeling? I hope at least some of you are feeling encouraged or even inspired. I'm cheering you on as you put these approaches into practice.

About the Author



Kari D. Boyle is a conflict engagement practitioner, consultant, trainer and retired lawyer. She served as Executive Director of Mediate BC Society for ten years followed by one year as its Director of Strategic Initiatives. She enjoys using her legal, mediation and management experience to improve citizens' access to viable and affordable conflict management options in the workplace and beyond. Previously, she practiced corporate commercial litigation in Vancouver for 14 years, worked in-house for 6 years specializing in legal services management, led mediation research initiatives at UBC, taught conflict resolution as an adjunct professor at UBC Law School and provided support to various justice-related system reform initiatives. She recently completed her roles as Project Manager of Mediate BC's Family Unbundled Legal Services Project and as a Board member and then Interim CEO of the BC Courthouse Library Society. She is currently the Coordinator of the BC Family Justice Innovation Lab and a member of the Access to Justice BC Leadership Group. She co-facilitates the Queen's IRC [Strategies for Workplace Conflicts](#) program. Kari earned her Bachelor of Laws from the University of British Columbia, preceded by two years in each of the faculties of Education and Commerce.

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